

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE IN BRITAIN

13th/14th November 1982

The 23rd annual autumn census of Greylag *Anser anser* and Pink-footed Geese *A. brachyrhynchus* was held over the weekend of 13th/14th November 1982. The Greylags had a good breeding season but numbers were down about 16,000 from November 1981 to a total of 80,000, while the Pinkfeet, with only a moderate breeding season, remained at about the 1981 level, with a total of 89,000.

The numbers of geese found roosting in each region and district of Scotland, and each county of England, are set out in the table below, together with the figures for November 1980 and 1981. The individual totals have been rounded to the nearest 10, while the national totals are rounded to the nearest 1000. Where identifiable, feral or indigenous flocks of Greylags have been omitted.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	9 Nov 1980	8 Nov 1981	14 Nov 1982	9 Nov 1980	8 Nov 1981	14 Nov 1982
Orkney	310	160	600	-	-	-
Highland						
Caithness	4090	4300	4140	-	-	-
Sutherland	20	-	20	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	15380	27400	8510	-	-	-
Inverness	4170	5300	720	-	-	-
Nairn	110	10	70	-	-	-
Badenoch & Strathspey	970	-	310	-	-	-
Grampian						
Moray	760	1580	2480	-	-	-
Banff & Buchan	4000	2750	11400	2200	5900	6200
Gordon	5670	6440	5040	4350	7300	6500
Kincardine & Deeside	2500	3980	10000	-	-	-
Tayside						
Angus	8400	2950	3360	7320	3400	11150
Perth & Kinross	23070	15030	16900	33010	15530	16050
Central						
Stirling	1300	1080	1050	2430	2500	5140
Fife	700	2250	90	4000	6150	920
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	1000	2790	1670	-	-	-
Cunningham	250	150	100	-	-	-
Renfrew	-	140	-	-	-	-
Dumbarton	2000	250	400	-	50	-
Strathkelvin	10	40	70	-	-	-
Lanark	1470	-	200	830	940	1220
Kyle and Carrick	400	460	350	-	-	-
Lothian						
West Lothian	-	-	-	-	-	-
Midlothian	730	2370	770	5350	8730	2120
East Lothian	30	840	390	11930	4510	6230
Borders						
Tweeddale	-	10	-	7230	12340	9310
Berwickshire	1600	820	200	3670	1000	1320
Roxburgh	6690	3950	1510	-	440	120

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	9 Nov 1980	8 Nov 1981	14 Nov 1982	9 Nov 1980	8 Nov 1981	14 Nov 1982
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	1400	2190	2600	-	160	-
Stewartry	910	740	1880	-	-	-
Nithsdale	70	310	800	3380	2210	1860
Northumberland	1430	4130	3850	20	-	30
Cumbria	1600	1300	450	70	20	-
Lancashire	-	-	-	9200	18240	18410
Humberside	-	-	-	320	-	-
Lincolnshire & Norfolk	-	-	-	50	530	1850
BRITISH TOTAL	90000	96000	80000	95000	90000	89000

Weather and general conditions

A fairly fine Saturday morning gradually deteriorated and many are had thick overcast with rain, hail or snow by evening, interfering with evening flight counts. Sunday was bright, clear and calm in most places after overnight snow and frost, but in the south and west it was much less pleasant with cloud and rain.

The harvest generally was early and clean. Ploughing was very well ahead in most regions. However, recent wet conditions had got the potato harvest bogged down, providing some better opportunities for goose feeding. An increasing general trend seems to be the change from arable, particularly barley, to grass and sheep. This is apparently in response to a combination of market forces (decline in whisky sales leading to a lower demand for top quality barley) and variations in farming subsidies (especially good on sheep). It is certainly reducing the traditional autumn stubble feeding available to the geese compared with a few years ago.

GREYLAGS

The population total produced by this census provides a real puzzle. Either a considerable number of geese were missed by the count, or there has been an unexpectedly high mortality. It will be recalled that the March count held in 1982 produced a low Greylag total, only 52,000, which suggested that between 20,000 and 30,000 birds might have been missed. Now we have a total of 80,000 when the breeding success in 1982 has been really rather good (30.1% young birds in a sample of 3500, mean brood size 2.6 in a sample of 132), and should have led to a total of somewhere between 105,000 and 110,000, given normal mortality. Have we again missed some 25,000, or are at least some of them dead, perhaps during the very cold weather of the 1981-82 winter? The November counts have, on the whole, "added up" reasonably well, balancing expected losses with each year's increment of young. And now, suddenly, there is a major discrepancy.

Certainly the conditions of the count were some way short of perfect. Not only was the weather poor in some areas, but the shortage of food, for example in the north of Scotland, caused the birds to be rather differently distributed from usual. Furthermore there was some evidence of movement taking place during the census weekend. All of these factors could add up to us missing quite a lot of birds, but it still seems surprising that so many could have been overlooked.

For various reasons the census was held one weekend later than usual. Whilst this must always increase the risk of bad weather, it does remove a potential danger of holding the census at the beginning of November, namely that some Greylags may not yet have arrived from Iceland. By the middle of the month they should certainly all be with us.

The regional distribution of the Greylags, shown in the table below, shows rather few overall differences from last year, which also had a clean harvest. However the main table, on the preceding pages, reveals that there was a considerable shift from Highland to Grampian within North Scotland, while South-west Scotland had more birds than usual at this time.

PINKFEET

The total for the species is much closer to the expected than is the Greylag's. With only a moderate breeding success in 1982 (16.1% young birds in a sample of just over 5000, and a mean brood size of 2.1 in 65 broods) little change would be likely, and the drop of 1000 from last year is insignificant.

Looking at the regional distribution, it is clear that South-east Scotland suffered a considerable decline, with the birds staying further north in the East Central region. There seemed to be an even cleaner harvest with more land ploughed in the former area than in the latter. Lancashire attracted almost exactly the same number as in 1981, also a year of clean harvests. There was a small but welcome increase round the Wash.

Regional distribution of Greylags and Pinkfeet in November 1980-1982

Figures are percentages of total populations

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	1980	1981	1982	1980	1981	1982
North Scotland	42.2	56.2	54.1	6.9	14.7	14.3
East Central Scotland	37.1	22.3	26.8	49.0	30.7	37.8
South-east Scotland	10.0	7.5	3.6	29.5	30.0	21.5
South-west Scotland	7.3	8.4	10.1	4.5	3.7	3.5
North England	3.4	5.6	5.4	9.7	20.3	20.8
East England	-	-	-	0.4	0.6	2.1

Spring census

Following last year's slightly experimental late March census, I would like to repeat the exercise on the same, third, weekend of the month. I enclose a request note and stamped addressed card as usual.

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I would like to thank all the people who took part in the census, often in less than comfortable conditions. The following are known to me by name, and I apologise to any I may have missed out.

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